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Feminism, interrupted? Gender and development in the era of 'Smart Economics'**Corresponding author:**

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Abstract

This article assesses feminist accounts of co-optation and appropriation in gender and development policy. Today women and girls are the public faces of anti-poverty policy and occupy an important position in development discourse; however, the ambiguities of the neoliberal gender agenda have provoked ongoing debate about the extent to which feminist aims and language have been and depoliticized by mainstream institutions. Have feminist aims been co-opted to legitimize anti-feminist policy goals, or does the current visibility of gender issues reflect the success of particular strands of (neo)liberal feminism? I explore these conflicting accounts by examining the current 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics' policy agenda, exploring its major themes and institutional form through a focus on two transnational business initiatives. The article concludes that, although accounts of feminism's cooptation are flawed in their misrepresentation of a diverse and dynamic movement, the transformations wrought by neoliberal-compatible feminisms present troubling challenges for feminists concerned with intersectionality and the links between gender and economic justice.

Keywords

Gender and development, feminism, neoliberalism, 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics'

Words

6,961 including references and footnotes

I Introduction

The linkage between gender equality and international development is well recognized today; women and girls are now the pre-eminent public faces of global development, heavily featured in the policy literature and public-facing documents across a range of institutions. From development initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals, to financial policy agendas like the World Bank's 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics' policy plan, to corporate social responsibility campaigns like Nike's 'Girl Effect', women and girls have achieved prominence in development narratives that imagine women's economic empowerment as a 'solution' to global poverty. On one hand, the near universal recognition of the centrality of gender equality to development and social justice marks a significant accomplishment for feminists, as it marks a turning point in the decades-long struggle to convince policy makers that gender equality matters for development and human wellbeing and, moreover, that women are agents – and not merely victims – in the process. On the other hand, these ostensible gains require close feminist scrutiny because much of the gender equality policy discourse is so closely tied to the advancement of a neoliberal economic policy agenda characterized by market fundamentalism, deregulation, and corporate-led development. Although feminist knowledge about violence and development has “acquired a measure of authority” in international policy, the changes wrought by feminist influence have fallen short of expectations and given rise to concerns that this ‘global’ feminism is “essentially doing violence itself” (Zalewski and Runyan, 2013: 299).

This ambiguous state of affairs has prompted significant debate within the feminist development and political economy literature, focused around one central question that I will explore in this article: Has feminism been coopted by neoliberalism? This is by no means a new question in the field, as feminist development research has long been engaged in

reflexive discussion about the extent to which feminist aims and language have been appropriated, mainstreamed, or integrated into policy. This debate is, however, particularly relevant now because of the unprecedented focus on girls and women in the development process, encapsulated in the current moment by a post-global financial crisis dialogue about the future stability of the economy and the recognition of women and girls as ‘solutions’ to these problems.

First, a conceptual clarification is required. Neoliberalism has a noted tendency to be employed broadly as a ‘one size fits all’ diagnosis for a variety of politico-economic issues; for this reason it is essential to carefully unpack the concept and employ precise conceptual tools to map its features. Neoliberalism is multifaceted, encompassing at least three dimensions: as a set of economic policies, it reflects a shift from state to market where welfarist policies are withdrawn and public serviced privatized (Larner, 2000: 7). This is the process Peck and Tickell call “roll-back neoliberalism”, as it involves the roll back of state welfare provision and the destruction of social institutions (2002: 384). As an ideology or governing rationality, neoliberalism reflects the expansion of market logic into all areas of political and social life, as well as governmental efforts to encourage individuals and institutions to act according to market norms (Larner, 2000: 12). This is a distinct phase termed “roll-out neoliberalism”, characterized by the creation of new governance forms, including socially interventionist policies and the delegation of authority to non-governmental agents (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 384).

This article examines current contributions to the cooptation debate and traces conceptual developments in the study of the relationship between feminism, neoliberalism, and development. To this end, I will employ Peck and Tickell’s “roll-back” and “roll-out”

distinction in order to evaluate different feminist accounts of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. I will suggest that feminist accounts of the co-optation of feminism adequately account for certain dimensions of “roll-back” neoliberalism, but fail to account for the emergence of a new range of “roll-out” neoliberalized forms that instrumentalize feminism for social interventions and the privatization of governmental power.

The remainder of the article proceeds as such: the second section will elaborate on previous feminist debates on co-optation (focused on WID and GAD frameworks) and situate this particular ‘moment’ in terms of the development of the discipline and its core concerns. The third section will address feminist critiques of the co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism, and examine the shortcoming of these critiques. The fourth section will introduce two examples of ‘neoliberalized’ feminism in the form of transnational business initiatives focused on the promotion of women’s empowerment and entrepreneurship. The fifth section will explore feminist accounts of fragmentation and the emergence of ‘new’ feminist forms in order to account for the success of corporatized feminist discourses and institutions. The article will conclude by reflecting on conceptual developments in the field and considering further pathways for research on these questions.

II From WID to GAD: Co-optation in Context

The issues introduced here reflect a longstanding debate within the feminist literature over the dangers of co-optation and the competing need for strategic development of salient policy narratives. Women first appeared on the development agenda as policy subjects in the mid 1970s, through the efforts of liberal feminist economists promoting the Women in Development (WID) framework. WID contended, broadly, that women had so far failed to

benefit from economic development because of their marginalization in particular forms of unskilled labour (Razavi and Miller, 1995; Tinker, 1990). Moreover, WID advocates suggested, the integration of women into development policy frameworks would benefit women and promote more efficiency in the development process; here, we see the first incarnation of the ‘win win’ narrative that characterizes so much of the policy discourse today. WID’s critics, comprised mostly of socialist and Third World feminists, took issue with the liberal feminist focus on access, highlighting the absence of a structural critique of capitalist development and its reproduction of gender inequalities (see Sen and Grown, 1985). From these criticisms emerged the Gender and Development (GAD) framework which sought to shift focus from the category of ‘women’ to the concept of ‘gender’ and from issues of women’s access to the labour market to an analysis of gendered power relations. GAD cast a focus on the gendered division of labour within the household, differential access to and inequality within wage work, access to and control over resources, and the social status of men and women (Rai, 2002: 71).

The issue of the political salience of particular gender and development narratives lies at the heart of the WID-GAD debate, due in no small part to the rapid institutional uptake of WID policy language and its continued influence. Institutional resistance to feminist approaches, stemming in part from a fear that demands for gender equality would require power redistribution, necessitated institutionally-sensitive and policy-oriented language (Moser, 1993; Razavi and Miller, 1995). WID frameworks, accordingly, promoted an efficiency rationale that sought to ‘sell’ gender to policy makers by demonstrating “what development needs from women” as opposed to “women’s needs and interests in development” (Goetz, 1994: 30). In practice, gender policy was made less threatening to bureaucrats and policy-makers by focusing on the ‘poorest of the poor’ (rather than intra-household gender power

relations), productive employment (rather than basic needs) and an instrumental emphasis on women's role in providing for the family's basic needs (Razavi and Miller, 1995). Framing gender issues in widely acceptable policy language was successful, therefore, to the extent that it raised the visibility of women in the development process, although it came at the cost of transformative feminist influence in the process; in fact, it worked to shore up the authority of pre-existing frameworks by appropriating feminist concerns (Kabeer, 1994; Rai, 2002). Although GAD emerged in response to the shortcomings of WID, and sought to foreground feminist concerns about relational inequality, GAD has too been the subject of co-optation. First, and most centrally, policy makers have collapsed the categories of women and gender, equating and thereby conflating two distinct lenses (Baden and Goetz, 1997). Secondly, the radical potential of GAD has been diminished by its reduction to mere policy language (re-labelling WID) or institutional gender mainstreaming approaches (Rai, 2002).

Reflection on feminist scholarship, particularly political and policy-oriented scholarship and activism, is continually engaged with anxiety about the co-optation, appropriation, and depoliticization of feminism (see Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead, 2008; Jackson and Pearson, 1998). In the current moment of unprecedented visibility of gender equality issues, this ongoing feminist debate has re-emerged to contend with alliances between feminists, mainstream development institutions, and corporate actors.

III Feminism, Co-opted?

The most influential (and controversial) account of feminism's co-optation by neoliberalism comes from Nancy Fraser's recent work on the "cunning of history". Feminism, Fraser suggests, contains certain "elective affinities" with neoliberalism and its critiques of the economism, androcentrism, etatism, and Westphalism of the welfare state have been taken

up and resignified to provide neoliberalism with a “romantic” gloss (2009). Fraser’s critique centers around the claim that feminist focus on the cultural politics of recognition of difference overshadowed and prevented adequate attention to the politics of redistribution, de-coupling the two and permitting the construction of feminism’s “uncanny double” that legitimizes neoliberal economic policies in the name of individual freedom, agency, and difference (2009: 114).

Despite what critics assert (see Funk, 2013), Fraser does not actually claim that feminists were complicit in this co-optation, but she instead sees second wave feminism as having “unwittingly provided a key ingredient to the spirit of the new neoliberalism” (Fraser, 2009: 110). This debate is an important one, because the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism, and the nature of its co-optation, matters enormously: have feminists been complicit or have feminist goals been inadvertently captured? Within the feminist literature, the co-optation of feminist concepts within mainstream institutions and neoliberal ideologies is attributed to linguistic vagueness which allows for re-signification (Batliwala, 2011; Cornwall and Brock, 2005), the technocratic re-labelling of feminism as ‘gender mainstreaming’ (McRobbie, 2009) and the structural restrictions within institutions that limit the space for feminist action (Rai, 2002; Kothari, 2005).

Critiques of feminism’s co-option particularly focus on the affinities between neoliberal globalization and feminist ideas about the emancipatory potential of employment and independent income. Despite predictions that women’s entry into the workforce would serve as a powerful promoter of gender equality in both the public and private spheres (Eisenstein, 1993), recent appraisals instead note a worrying segmentation of the female workforce. In particularly evocative and gendered language, Hester Eisenstein laments the ways that

feminism has been “seduced” by “corporate leaders and elites” (2009): while women have been incorporated into the economy, they have been split into high-wage managers and low-wage, precarious workers. The liberal feminist focus on promoting women’s careers in business has converged with employers’ interests in exploiting female labour, resulting in a model of managerial, free-market feminism that does not contest, and moreover strengthens, the neoliberal model of privatization and state rollback (Eisenstein, 2009; McRobbie, 2013; Prügl, 2014). The past few decades have seen the “feminization” of employment, a concept which signals both an increase in women’s overall share of paid employment and a worsening in the conditions of men’s jobs, making them more like the conditions of ‘women’s’ jobs (Elson, 2003; Standing, 1989). The “feminization” of employment and increasing numbers of women in paid employment has not been accompanied by substantial improvements in women’s incomes or ability to exercise power, however: the “feminization” of poverty has meant only that women perform more work and different kinds of work, yet significant disparities in gender power persist (Chant, 2008).

Evaluating the Co-optation Account

Narratives of the co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism provide a persuasive account of the ways that “roll-back neoliberalism” have converged with feminist critiques of the state, the male-breadwinner model, and ideas about the liberatory potential of employment. The uptake of certain strands of feminist discourse related to employment, income, and autonomy undoubtedly gives a “gloss” to a neoliberal policy agenda which aims to re-configure citizens in terms of their relation to and their ability to produce for the market.

However, within the body of literature that examines feminism’s supposed co-optation by neoliberalism, a few areas of significant concern emerge. The first revolves around the

question of feminist collusion with neoliberalism: have feminist principles been co-opted, or have feminists embraced and nurtured particular affinities between the agendas? By insisting on the co-optation of feminist principles, this account ignores the possibility of diversity and dissent within the movement, misrecognizing the efforts of feminists to craft a “strategic use of positivist essentialism” for political ends (Spivak, 1988: 205). Certainly, to discount the possibility of strategic feminist narratives which position feminist aims *alongside* and *in promotion of* pre-existing institutional goals risks ignoring the substantial impact of ‘femocrats’ in national and global governance (see Miller and Razavi, 1998; Rai, 2003; Ferguson, 2014).

Second, accusations of feminist co-optation are highly contested because of their reliance on a loss narrative that risks conjuring a nostalgic and naïve understanding of second wave feminism. Nancy Fraser’s account in particular has faced criticism for misrepresenting the unity of the feminist movement, especially in her construction of an idealized second-wave dominated by socialist feminists, and depicting feminism as a static, monolithic body (Funk, 2013; Gregoratti and Allison, 2013; Prügl, 2014). Loss narratives imagine contemporary feminism as insufficiently radical, overly professionalized, and fully coopted by hegemonic institutions (Hemmings, 2011); contingent on an idealized representation of the second wave as an ideologically purer time, this narrative works to erase exclusions within that movement which have been repeatedly and persuasively demonstrated by black, Third World, and queer feminists (see Mohanty, 1988). Given the diverse, dynamic, and ever *unfinished* nature of the movement, reflection is surely warranted but lament for a past era perhaps has exclusionary implications.

Lastly, and as I will discuss in greater detail below, although narratives of feminism's co-optation provide convincing accounts of the co-optation and appropriation of its core principle in service of roll-back neoliberalism and state withdrawal, the emergence of new roll-out forms presents a challenge. Critiques of co-optation cannot fully account for the emergence of new neoliberalized forms that join mainstream development institutions, corporations, and grassroots feminist groups in new partnerships, in a broader context of widespread 'consensus' around gender equality. In the following two sections, I will sketch an outline of these new neoliberal feminist forms and consider current feminist analysis of them, exploring the extent to which studies of 'new' or fragmented feminism explain the rapid proliferation of 'Smart Economics' initiatives.

IV Neoliberal Feminism: Transnational Business Initiatives

Feminist accounts of co-optation lament the way that feminist claims and ideas have been appropriated and de-politicized when they are assimilated into powerful global governance discourses and institutions. Yet, this claim deserves further scrutiny: Where are these 'neoliberal' feminists? What kinds of power do they possess and what vision of gender justice do they (fail to) articulate? A broad range of public institutions have adopted gender policies characterized by an instrumental focus on the economic impact of gender equality, which highlights the 'business case' for equality and the potential economic impact of women's empowerment. This has been accompanied by a range of partnerships between public institutions and corporations to promote gender equality as part of their 'corporate citizenship' initiatives, including (but not limited to) the Nike Foundation's partnership with the World Bank (the Adolescent Girl Initiative), the UN Women partnership with Coca Cola (the 5by20 Strategic Partnership), the United Nations Foundation's partnership with Exxon Mobile (the Roadmap for Women's Empowerment), and a variety of partnerships between

corporations and non-profits for empowerment (see Prügl and True, 2014; Bexell, 2012; Dauvergne and Lebaron, 2014; Prugl 2014). In this section, I will outline two public-private partnerships focused on gender equality and empowerment in order to examine the efforts and achievements of ‘neoliberal feminists’: the first is Goldman Sachs’ ‘Womenomics’ and ‘10,000 Women’ initiatives; the second is the Nike Foundation’s ‘Girl Effect’ campaign.

From the late 1990’s, Goldman Sachs has developed a gender-focused investment theme called ‘Womenomics’ which stresses the profits to be made from women as investors and consumers of credit. Within the ‘Womenomics’ theme, in 2008 Goldman Sachs has developed a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative called ‘10,000 Women’ which focuses on the empowerment of small-scale female entrepreneurs in the developing world and aims to give them American MBA-style training in order to grow their businesses. Women are the targets of this programme because of the assumption that they will re-invest gains in their families and communities; as Goldman explains, “10,000 women is not a program, it’s a movement” (Goldman Sachs 2010: 25 quoted in Prugl and True 2014: 10). In March 2014, Goldman Sachs announced a partnership with the World Bank Group’s International Finance Corporation to fill the “credit gap” of women-owned enterprises in the developing world by creating mechanisms for easier access to capital (Goldman Sachs 2014).

The Goldman project stresses the profits that can be extracted from investment in female labour power and entrepreneurial enterprises, but also emphasizes the need to equip women with the necessary skills to participate as fully empowered economic agents. As such, initiatives like 10,000 Women involve a range of training interventions to ‘skill’ women in the developing world in order to grow their businesses. The prominence and political salience of the project encapsulates the success of corporatized feminist efforts to put gender ‘on the

agenda’, albeit it the agenda of financialization. The narratives of ‘Gender Equality as Smart Economics’ and the ‘Business Case’ for gender equality have achieved widespread institutional uptake and become part of the oft-repeated logic of neoliberal development. Women’s entrepreneurship – and the contention that women’s ‘natural’ entrepreneurial potential is currently unrecognized and under-invested – is a prominent focus of gender and development discourses today (Gregoratti and Allison 2013: 2); the second prominent figure who animates global development discourses is that of the girl child, who is represented as “the world’s greatest untapped resource” (Girl Effect, n.d. SE: 2).

At the 2008 World Economics Forum meeting, the Nike Foundation launched the ‘Girl Effect’ initiative. In cooperation with other corporate, non-profit, and governmental partners, the Girl Effect campaign aims to “make the case for girls” (Girl Effect, n.d. ‘About’) and raise awareness among the public that investment in girls can “stop poverty before it starts” (Girl Effect n.d. ‘Smart Economics’). The campaign includes a website, video campaign, and donation portal; it has become particularly notable for its viral video appeals which creatively use animation to depict emotional narratives about the empowerment of women and girls.¹ The Girl Effect has generated enormous publicity, with its appeals shown at Davos, the Clinton Global Initiative, and on the Oprah Winfrey show; it is promoted by a range of celebrity ambassadors and high-profile figures including Michele Bachelet, Hillary Clinton, and Sheryl Sandberg (Kylander 2011; Elias 2013). Like ‘10,000 Women’, the Girl Effect campaign (and associated Nike Foundation initiatives) aims to ‘sell’ the empowerment of

¹ Feminist appraisal of the Girl Effect videos, however, has been almost uniformly critical of their neo-colonial and interventionist messages, particularly noting the way that the campaign suggests the need for intervention to transform and eradicate ‘backwards’ social norms and forms of kinship (see Wilson 2011; Switzer 2013; Hickel 2014).

women and girls to the private sector in terms of a synergy between social and economic return on investment, with an emphasis on the power of the consumer to empower girls around the world. More broadly, the ‘Girl Effect’ has come to stand for a set of powerful and politically resonant discourses about the dividends of investing in girls and the power of girls of the global South to become development ‘solutions’ for the future: it constitutes an “assemblage of transnational policy discourses, novel corporate investment priorities, biopolitical interventions, branding and marketing campaigns, charitable events designed to produce a social movement for change, and designer goods” (Koffman and Gill, 2013: 84).

I suggest that these two transnational business initiatives for the governance of gender constitute manifestations of ‘roll-out’ neoliberalism: first, they embody new forms of interventionist social policy which aim to train and shape bodies for particular forms of economic agency and participation. Women and girls have become a central focus for social policies which aim to shape their ‘human capital’: social policies in areas like health, education, and population work to increase investment in girls (“human capital in the making”) and women (“maternal agents” who shape girls’ capital) (Mahon 2010: 176-8). Initiatives like 10,000 Women reflect the new constitution of women as ideal neoliberal subjects, insofar as they are attributed a special (and intrinsic) entrepreneurial potential which derives from their ‘maternal’ nature (see Rankin 2001; Isserles 2003). It represents their economic agency as dormant, untapped, and unproductive; yet, it proposes a range of interventions to inculcate them with a market rationality “such that they operate as better workers” (Bedford 2005: 295).

Second, transnational business initiatives like 10,000 Women and the Girl Effect reflect the offloading of governmental power to the private sector and the subsequent empowerment of

corporations as legitimate authority figures in development governance. With 10,000 Women and its new credit-provision facilities, Goldman's initiatives promote an understanding of the corporation as the best-placed and most efficient provider of development services, all while rendering invisible its own role in the 2008 global financial crisis (Roberts and Soederberg 2012). The Girl Effect campaign similarly relies on tropes about the power of the ethical consumer to empower girls and women of the global South, positioning Nike Inc. as a benevolent force for change and the purchase of its products as grassroots action against global poverty (Dauvergne and Lebaron 2014).

Both initiatives have emerged as part of broader trends around the 'girl powering' of global development, prominence of 'Smart Economics' narratives about the potential profitability of women's empowerment, and high profile female figures in the corporate and development worlds. They encompass the challenge of visibility outlined in the introduction to this article: initiatives like 10,000 Women and the Girl Effect, by virtue of their powerful institutional affiliations, are able to amass enormous funds for girls and women, but to what end? While there is ample scope for critique of these initiatives – and feminists should be deeply concerned by the way that they work to increase corporate power in development governance while screening off scrutiny of supply chain practices and/ or deflecting regulation– the power of neoliberal/ business feminisms is important and cannot be fully explained in the terms of co-optation of feminism by neoliberalism.

V New Feminisms?

The challenge of women's visibility in development stems, fundamentally, from the newfound influence of particularly salient policy narratives, albeit narratives that stress the instrumental value of gender equality for national and global governmental institutions and

the private sector. Feminist political and cultural theorists have introduced new frameworks to capture recent feminist incarnations, among them “transnational business feminism” (Roberts 2012; 2014), “market feminism” (Kantola and Squires, 2012), and “post-feminist” politics at the level of global governance (McRobbie, 2009; Elias, 2013). Each perspective contributes an important conceptual element to feminist analysis of neoliberalism: ‘post-feminism’ illuminates the extent to which ‘Smart Economics’ and neoliberalized feminist forms function as biopolitical technologies of governance; ‘transnational business feminism’ demonstrates the relationship between gender equality discourses and corporate power in development governance; and ‘market feminism’ highlights the complex and ambiguous position of feminist activists and bureaucrats who are responsible for putting gender ‘on the agenda’ of mainstream and technocratic institutions. In contrast to the co-optation narratives, contributions from this perspective emphasize the multiple and sometimes contradictory strands of feminism, noting in particular the successful efforts of liberal feminists to “rehabilitate” some feminist discourses and goals, albeit in support of a broadly neoliberal agenda (McRobbie, 2013: 120) while remaining critical of the extent to which particular feminist discourses legitimize neoliberalism. In this section, I will examine each of these three feminist accounts and consider their usefulness in explaining the convergence between feminism and roll-out neoliberalism, embodied in the two transnational business initiatives introduced above.

1 Post-feminism

The emergence of corporate and managerial feminist forms – particularly embodied in public-private partnerships for gender equality and empowerment – reflects the social interventionist aspects of roll-out neoliberalism and its deployment of technologies to construct “new social subjects” (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 389-90). In particular, accounts of

fragmented feminisms and the proliferation of different forms of neoliberal feminism are better able to account for the way that women are now constituted as an “ideal neoliberal subject” in development discourses (Elias, 2013: 153) and the myriad biopolitical interventions which are proposed to transform her economic agency.

While Angela McRobbie (2009) introduces the concept of ‘post-feminism’ to understand the ways in which feminism has been incorporated into political and cultural life (under patriarchal control) and de-coupled from collective action, Juanita Elias uses ‘post-feminism’ to illuminate the way that gendered discourses of efficiency, individualism, and self-care contribute to the “production of neo-liberal compatible subjectivities” (Elias, 2013: 156). At the level of global governance, Elias suggests that ‘post-feminist’ politics manifest themselves in the dominant de-politicized institutional discourses of gender equality which produce a technocratic and economistic approach to gender issues and position girls as an ideal site of intervention to promote growth. Interpreting the discourse of ‘Smart Economics’ as a governing rationality, Elias describes its effects in relation to the legacy of other “discursive techniques” which sought to transform women and other marginal groups into responsabilized, rational economic agents (see Rankin, 2001). Campaigns like the Girl Effect reflect a post-feminist representational regime of girls’ empowerment because they valorize ‘success’ in relation to a neoliberal economic system which is wholly disconnected from either the role of feminist political action or Nike’s own supply chain practices (Elias, 2013: 163).

2 Transnational Business Feminisms

Adrienne Roberts (2012; 2014a; 2014b) introduces the politico-economic “discursive assemblage” of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’ (TBF) which comprises a coalition of

liberal feminist organizations, capitalist states, non-governmental institutions, and international financial institutions that have converged on the goal of promoting gender equality (2012: 87). Roberts identifies five core components of this emergent discourse: its transnational scope, increased role for corporate power, focus on the 2008 global financial crisis, conceptual reliance on instrumentalized narratives of the ‘business case’ for gender equality, and overriding message of convergence between feminist and neoliberal capitalist goals (2014a).

Roberts’ work on ‘Transnational Business Feminism’ accounts for different aspects of neoliberal feminisms, providing a historical materialist perspective on the relationship between feminism, capitalism, and the contradictions therein. First, the lens of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’ highlights the increased power of corporations in development governance and, specifically, the new regime of gender equality policies and interventions. Because its ideological basis is rooted in a ‘Business Case’ approach, TBF stresses the profitable outcomes of women’s empowerment and the central role of corporations in promoting gender equality, thereby “fusing” gender equality to participation in the capitalist market (2014a: 5). Second, Roberts’ ‘transnational business feminism’ framework accounts for the increased role of corporate and financial power in new manifestations of neoliberal feminism. The TBF discourse, she demonstrates, relies on the assumption that women need better access to credit closer financial relationships with financial institutions; TBF initiatives thereby work to expand capital’s reach and contribute to the financialization of development (2012: 99-100).

Initiatives like 10,000 Women and the Girl Effect are paradigmatic of ‘Transnational Business Feminism’ because they function largely to “naturalize and de-politicize” the power

of the corporation in development governance and poverty eradication, while framing gender equality in terms of its relationship to efficiency and competitiveness (2014a: 15). Elisabeth Prugl, who adopts the term ‘corporate feminism’ to capture this phenomenon, outlines the relationship between feminism, corporations, and globalization as such:

Women’s empowerment projects help [multi-national corporations] capture markets by harnessing women’s business acumen; they help them stabilise their supply chains by optimising women’s labour power; and they help them develop a reputation as good corporate citizens in a globalised economy (2014: 13)

While the Girl Effect campaign shores up the authority of the Nike Foundation (and by extent, Nike Inc.) as an expert in gender and development, it further opens space for collaboration between the corporation and public institutions. The Nike Foundation has been involved in the World Bank’s Gender Action Plan and Adolescent Girl Initiative and has partnered with the UK’s Department for International Development to launch the GirlHub project which aims to finance projects for adolescent girls in the developing world and to promote investment in girls (Roberts 2014a). Similarly, Goldman Sachs’ leadership role in 10,000 Women works to present gender inequality as a problem which can be solved through the introduction of market logic and private sector expertise (Roberts and Soederberg 2012: 958-9).

3 Market Feminisms

Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires (2012) identify emergent forms of “market feminism”, rooted in and developing from state feminism, which demonstrate greater feminist engagement with private sector organisations and strategies. Market feminists, like state feminists before them, explicitly seek to promote gender equality through existing

institutional channels by articulating feminist discourses that appeal to a wide range of policy makers, although market feminisms tend to represent the interests of a narrow, elite group of liberal feminists. Market feminists operate in a constrained context in which feminist claims must be formulated in accordance with the values of cost-effectiveness and partnership with private interests in order to achieve influence (2012: 386-7). As such, primary is accorded to feminist discourses which are “mediated” through the market and made compatible with a market agenda (2012: 383). Similarly, the demand for evidence-based policy-making has put pressure on feminist activists to professionalize in order to pursue more ‘legitimate’ kinds of expertise by speaking the language of funding institutions, relaying on economic (rather than political) discourses, and framing their research in order to meet organizational expectation (2012: 388).

Feminist bureaucrats and ‘gender experts’ in development face the central challenge of trying to “devise strategies to maximize their potential to influence political agendas” within the institutions where they work, while also trying to challenge and transform those institutions (Ferguson 2014: 6). Research on gender and development work continually demonstrates the narrow constraints within which ‘gender experts’ can work: they are limited by the need to work within “the efficiency constraint” (Bedford 2007), to “sell” gender expertise to policy - makers in order to ensure its inclusion in the policy planning process (Goetz 1994), and to demonstrate the value of ‘gender expertise’ to the institution itself (Ferguson 2014). While feminist political economy literature is (rightly) deeply critical of transnational business initiatives that commodify gender equality and re-interpret it through neoliberal capitalism, there is still the need to recognize the enormous successes of feminists working in non-feminist institutions. In short, the challenge of visibility (as I have termed it) fundamentally stems from the efforts of feminist activists, bureaucrats, researchers, and the many feminists

who introduce ‘gender expertise’ where it is not welcome; there has been a significant shift, although there is a danger of ignoring or mis-recognizing those feminists within institutions and their efforts. There is a need for more research in this area, especially in relation to feminists (and non-feminist ‘gender experts’) working within transnational business initiatives and navigating the contradictions therein.

VI Conclusions

Feminist development and political economy literature currently finds itself in a peculiar position, where the high visibility of gender equality issues in global governance is tempered by the recognition of problematic associations between liberal feminism and neoliberal economic policies. As a result, significant debate has emerged in the field about the extent to which feminism has been forcibly coopted, seduced by, or consciously aligned with neoliberalism and the impact of prominent liberal feminist discourses which stress the instrumental value of gender equality for extant economic policies. This debate has revolved around a few key themes: the difference between rhetorical and substantive engagement with feminist aims, the peril of collaboration with mainstream governmental and financial institutions, and the future directions for feminist action. Overriding this debate is one central question: to what extent can these new, technocratic discourses of gender equality be identified as *feminist*? Do they represent feminism corrupted or simply fragmented?

Ultimately, the question of ‘what is really feminist’ is an elusive and unproductive one because it can only be answered with reference to an arbitrary and subjective set of boundaries. Moreover, this kind of litmus test is anathema to the plural and inclusive nature of feminism. I have argued above that accounts of feminism’s co-optation by neoliberalism are flawed, in part because they misrecognize the efforts of feminists to work within

institutions and develop politically resonant narratives that align feminist aims with the institutional priorities, and because in doing so they erase the diversity of feminist voices. The successes of liberal feminists to articulate a politically appealing account of gender equality as economic growth represents an ambiguous achievement, however, for the ways in which narratives of ‘Gender Equality as Smart Economics’ legitimize harmful neoliberal economic policies, empower corporate actors in the governance process, compound the invisibility of social reproduction, and close off space for resistance by anti-capitalist feminists. Using Peck and Tickell’s roll-back and roll-out neoliberalisms as a framing device, I have suggested that new ‘Smart Economics’ gender equality initiatives are manifestations of roll-out neoliberalism which cannot be adequately explained through co-optation accounts, but which require direct engagement with the power of femocrats and corporations in the development process.

The current funding context undoubtedly underscores the importance of these debates and the need for future research. In 2013, the Association of Women in Development released a report on funding for women’s rights that identified three major trends: 1) the presence of ‘women and girls’ as a (rhetorical) priority in nearly every funding sector, 2) the upsurge of private sector actors in development financing, and 3) the corporatization of development agendas and financing (Arutyunova and Clark, 2013). The evidently increasing power of the institutions, policies, and actors that constitute the political and social discursive assemblage of (neo)liberal feminism warrants further research in this area, including exploration of the policy processes behind these discourses, the institutional culture of actors in the corporatized gender-equality agenda, and the effect of the current funding agenda on grassroots activism.

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